
MEMORANDUM

DATE: 12/19/2007
TO: FWP Director Hagener
CC: FWP Commissioners, Chris Smith, Ken McDonald
FROM: Chase Hibbard and the Montana Wolf Advisory Council
RE: Meeting Summary

At your request, the Montana Wolf Advisory Council met on December 9 and 10, 2007 in Helena. You asked us to discuss the appropriateness of using the biennial season-setting process to develop a wolf season structure at this time, harvest objectives, and the elements of a tentative wolf hunting and trapping season structure.

Ten of the original 12 members attended. On December 9, Carolyn Sime provided an overview of the status of the delisting process, Montana wolves, and implementation of Montana's plan to date. On December 10, the Council discussed the topics requested and adjourned at 3:00pm. Our deliberations were focused and cordial, picking up where we left off several years ago.

Several interested members of the public attended. On December 9, they participated in a question / answer session after Carolyn's presentation. On December 10, they were provided an opportunity to address the Council. Several provided written comments.

The Council was grateful for the opportunity to learn more about the topics at hand and appreciated being consulted. On their behalf, I am forwarding a summary of our meeting and our specific recommendations.

Attachment

Montana Wolf Management Advisory Council

Meeting Summary

December 9 and 10, 2007

Meeting Context

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to announce a decision to delist gray wolves in the northern Rockies in February 2008. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) has been developing a tentative wolf hunting and trapping season in anticipation of delisting so that it could be completed in a thoughtful, professional way and so that there would be adequate opportunity for public comment through the FWP Commission biennial season setting process.

A wolf season could not be implemented until delisting. FWP has based the tentative wolf season on the approved State plan but wanted to consult with the Wolf Advisory Council and gather feedback and any more specific recommendations. More specifically, FWP sought Council input on: the appropriateness of using the biennial season-setting process to develop a wolf season structure at this time, harvest objectives, and elements of a wolf season (e.g. draft management unit boundaries, season dates, means of take etc.).

Summary

The Montana Wolf Advisory Council reaffirms the principles and provisions of the Montana Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan. Its particular strength is the adaptive management framework which will maintain a secure population, manage wolves similar to other wildlife species, and yet allow FWP the flexibility to adjust the management program as it gains more experience in balancing the social, economic, and biological aspects of a recovered wolf population.

The adaptive management framework establishes an iterative process by which management tools and their applications are based on the status of the wolf population. In an incremental fashion, management tools become progressively more liberal if there are more than 15 Breeding Pairs statewide and more conservative as they decline toward the minimum of 15 Breeding Pairs.

Monitoring efforts will help gauge the effects and outcomes of management (including public harvest) so that adjustments could be made. That flexibility will ensure that the population remains secure while also attempting to maintain the delicate balance of social tolerance, livestock damage, human safety, the status of prey populations, and other habitat factors.

When the numbers of Breeding Pairs (an adult male and an adult female and 2 pups on December 31) in Montana exceeds 15, FWP shall establish regulated hunting and trapping with FWP Commission oversight. Public harvest will be regulated on a quota or permit system with mandatory reporting. The harvest quota should become more liberal as the number of Breeding Pairs increases above 15. The Montana wolf plan provides an appropriate safety net in that it is based on the federal definition of Breeding Pair and not all Montana packs qualify as a “Breeding Pair” by the more restrictive definition. Furthermore, the 15 Breeding Pair benchmark exceeds the 10 Breeding Pair minimum required to maintain a recovered population.

Accordingly, the Council supports the establishment of seasons and regulations for hunting and trapping of wolves to be implemented upon successful delisting. The Council suggests that FWP begin cautiously due to the initial uncertainty about how effective a public harvest will be. With implementation of this new tool – public hunting and trapping – FWP should consider current wolf numbers a starting point against which to measure the effects of harvest and then adjust harvest opportunity in the future in accordance with the provisions of the Montana Wolf Management Plan, considering biological and social factors and the status of the wolf population.

Specific Recommendations

The Council agrees that hunting and trapping should be management tools, but recommends initial implementation should only include hunting quotas. Inclusion of trapping quotas should be considered later based upon experience and results of the initial hunting season.

The Council agrees with the initial framework of three management units but recommends maintaining flexibility to direct harvest pressure to existing and potential areas of conflict with humans, livestock and prey. Smaller management units may be appropriate in the future in order to more efficiently direct harvest pressure.

According to the scientific literature, wolf populations can sustain an annual human-caused mortality rate of 30-40% (or greater depending on the geographic area and other factors) and remain stable (Fuller et al. 2003). Consequently, the Council recommends, for the purpose of setting quotas, an initial take of approximately 30% of known wolves (estimated by FWP as 400 currently in Montana). This would include other forms of human caused mortality. Harvest objectives and harvest opportunity may change in the future relative to biological and social factors.

Subsequent season quotas should reflect the philosophy and intent of the Montana Wolf Management Plan which recommends integrating and sustaining wolf populations in suitable habitats occurring within the complex biological, social, economic, and political landscape of Montana, while ensuring human safety, safeguarding Montana’s livestock industry, maintaining wildlife population, and upholding the support of people with diverse public interests.

Citation:

Fuller, T. K., L.D. Mech, and J.F. Cochrane. 2003. Wolf Population Dynamics. Pages 161-191 in L. D. Mech and L. Boitani, editors. Wolves: behavior, ecology, and conservation. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Montana Wolf Advisory Council Members

Chase Hibbard, Chair*

Robin Hompesch*

Dr. Charles Buehler*

Jim Cross*

Hank Fischer*

Dan Carney*

Bruce Malcolm*

Nelson Wert*

Terry Beaver*

Bruce Tutvedt*

Jay Kirkpatrick

Darlyne Dascher

* attended this meeting